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# Social exclusion: Cultural dissonance between Travellers and non-Travellers in British secondary schools

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# Social exclusion: Cultural dissonance between Travellers and non-Travellers in British secondary schools

## **Abstract**

The British government aims to provide education for all and meet every student's basic learning needs. The school system is the main avenue for educating pupils in Britain, but it is based on dominant cultures in the UK and does not always enable pupils from subordinate cultures to learn and develop their principles and values, especially students from Romani backgrounds. Such practices could lead to social exclusion. This paper looks at the cultural dissonance between Travellers and non-Travellers in British secondary schools. It analyses cultural discord between Traveller and non-Traveller pedagogies, traditions, behaviour, beliefs, expectations and values. The discordance could lead to Traveller pupils' social exclusion, and the paper concludes by suggesting ways that schooling could improve the system, so that Travellers are more likely to be included. In doing so, there is more chance of a successful education for all that meets basic learning needs and enriches more students' lives.

## **Keywords**

British secondary schools, cultural dissonance, Gypsy, non-Traveller, Roma, social exclusion, Traveller



## **Social exclusion: Cultural dissonance between Travellers and non-Travellers in British secondary schools**

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The British government aims to provide education for all and meet every student's basic learning needs. The school system is the main avenue for educating pupils in Britain, but it is based on dominant cultures in the UK and does not always enable pupils from subordinate cultures to learn and develop their principles and values, especially students from Romani backgrounds. Such practices could lead to social exclusion. This paper looks at the cultural dissonance between Travellers and non-Travellers in British secondary schools. It analyses cultural discord between Traveller and non-Traveller pedagogies, traditions, behaviour, beliefs, expectations and values. The discordance could lead to Traveller pupils' social exclusion, and the paper concludes by suggesting ways that schooling could improve the system, so that Travellers are more likely to be included. In doing so, there is more chance of a successful education for all that meets basic learning needs and enriches more students' lives.

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### **Introduction**

In Britain, Travellers continue to be excluded and regarded as 'other' within the dominant non-Traveller society (Bhopal, 2004, 2011a, 2011b; Themelis & Foster, 2013). Education is the most important means of addressing Travellers' social exclusion (Liegeois, 1998), but only one in eight young Travellers, on average, attends a British secondary school (Derrington, 2010). Indeed, "Gypsy and Traveller pupils fare worst in the education system" (Smith & Greenfields, 2012, p. 50), with O'Hanlon (2010) suggesting that government policies on education fail to accommodate Gypsy Travellers' needs. UK policy makers and practitioners have not made sufficient progress to narrow the gap between Traveller students and the rest of society (Themelis & Foster, 2013), while secondary education for people from Gypsy Traveller groups is inadequate (Law & Swann, 2013; Levinson & Hooley, 2013). This paper will consider the cultural dissonance between Traveller and non-Traveller societies in British secondary schools, through addressing forms of this discordant relationship, including traditions, pedagogies and behaviours.



### **Discordant Relationships**

Travellers and non-Travellers want to co-exist without including the other group in their own. There has been a prevailing desire by Travellers to separate Roma from non-Travellers, because they fear that non-Travellers will dilute their cultural identity (Ivatts, 1998; Law & Swann, 2013; Zatta, 1990). Travellers are also reluctant to send their children to school due to notions of trust (Bhopal et al., 2000; Toninato, 2014; Warrington, 2007). They are also concerned about negative cultural influences from non-Traveller society (Marks, 2006), such as the morality of teenage girls, sex education, drugs and detrimental effects on the family (Save the Children, 2001). At the same time, educators do not want Traveller children in their classes (Derrington & Kendall, 2004) and display negative attitudes toward Gypsy and Traveller pupils (Bhopal, 2011b). Schools are reluctant to accept Gypsy Traveller pupils because of the fear that the nomadic community has low attendance and low achievement, which will lower school performance and position in the league tables (Bhopal et al., 2000; Cudworth, 2008). However, sections 15ZA and 18A of the *Education Act 1996* (updated by *Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009*) require local authorities to provide all young people – whether Traveller or non-Traveller – with compulsory suitable education and training until they are 17 years old. In 2015, the minimum compulsory school leaving age will be raised to 18 (*Apprenticeship, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009*). Local authorities must also provide support for young people aged 19 and below that will inspire, empower or help them to participate in education or training (section 68, *Education and Skills Act 2008*).

The most common way to do so is through state schooling (British Council, 2004; TDA, 2010). Hegemonic examples of bringing two opposing groups together, such as this one, are likely to breed cultural dissonance (Gordon & Yowell, 1999). Therefore, secondary schooling actually facilitates social exclusion in the case of Traveller pupils, contributing to why they do not always want to attend school.

### **Discordant Pedagogies**

Absence from school and irregular school attendance has a detrimental effect on the education of Travellers (Bhopal, 2004; Wilkin et al., 2010). Indeed, Ofsted (2003) asserts that “[a] very significant number of Traveller children, mainly at Key Stages 3 and 4, lack education” (p. 10), because they do not attend school. Travellers and Gypsy/Roma ethnic groups have the highest absence rate from secondary school out of every ethnic group in Britain (DfE, 2013) and often underachieve in terms of the dominant culture’s standards when they do choose to attend school (Foster & Norton, 2012). However, researchers fail to differentiate between ‘schooling’ and ‘education’, without an appreciation that Travellers have different pedagogies and standards to non-Travellers. Traditionally, Traveller children learn through immersion in the family (Bhopal, 2011b; O’Hanlon, 2010; Toninato, 2014) and by participating in real-life activities. The secondary schooling curriculum is not flexible enough to value or incorporate such skills learned at home, so school is seen as increasingly irrelevant (Levinson & Hooley, 2013). Indeed, many Travellers see school as an institutional learning environment for a sedentary culture, whereas they see home as an unrestrained learning environment for an active culture (Bhopal, 2011b). Levinson and Hooley (2013) give the example that Traveller children learn about tree surgery



and horse training from an early age. At school, Traveller children cannot learn these skills amongst their family, because they participate in an academic learning environment, and not a practical one. Therefore, regular school attendance has a detrimental effect on Traveller children's education, because it reduces integration into the family and their knowledge of real-life Romani activities. In a sense, Travellers who go to secondary school are socially excluded from the Romani world, because their traditional pedagogies are culturally dissonant with the dominant education system.

### **Discordant Traditions**

The dominant school system is also rooted in different traditions to the Traveller community. Romani culture has an oral tradition (Kruczek-Steiger & Simmons, 2001; Matras, 2010; Toninato, 2014), but secondary schooling is founded on the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy that pupils acquire at primary school. Although some Traveller parents want their children to learn these skills to empower them in the changing environment (Bhopal, 2004; Myers, McGhee & Bhopal, 2010), schooling still has a negative social value in Traveller society. Levinson (2007) found that Travellers denied that they could read or write, even if they possessed such skills, because it "betrayed their heritage" (p. 22). Nonetheless, secondary schooling assumes that reading, writing and numeracy are valued by every community and individual. This belief overlooks the potential negative impact on Travellers' lives and membership within their community. Secondary schooling socially excludes Traveller children, because it is founded on a tradition that is culturally dissonant with Romani culture.

### **Discordant Values**

Secondary schools and Traveller families value different skill sets and knowledge, embodied in the ability to perform labour. Non-Travellers value qualifications, like GCSEs, to manifest their achievements and competencies, but Romani culture values practical skills, like co-operation, networking, adapting to change (O'Hanlon, 2010), independence, initiative, responsibility and accountability (Toninato, 2014), all of which they learn at home. Ofsted (2003) also found Travellers became disaffected by the national curriculum and tended to disappear at key stages 3 and 4. For this reason, schools should offer a more practical approach that is relevant to everyday life, which reflects and values the differences of a nomadic lifestyle and culture (Bhopal, 2004). Failing to take this approach results in Traveller pupils excluding themselves from the secondary school environment, because education does not prepare them for working life, it just removes them further from traditional Romani social spheres. This removal leads to social exclusion at home. Traveller children exclude themselves from secondary schooling, because it facilitates values that are culturally dissonant with Romani culture.



### **Discordant Expectations**

Secondary schooling has different expectations of young people to Romani families, where secondary school teachers often expect young people to continue full-time education and training beyond the compulsory school leaving age (Derrington, 2010). However, just under a quarter of Traveller pupils drop out in post-primary education, if they attend at all (Byrne & Smyth, 2010), and Ofsted (2003) found that less than 20% of Traveller pupils enrolled onto post-16 courses, describing such small proportions as “very worrying” (Ofsted, 2003, p. 21), which has led to “widespread concern” (DCSF, 2009, p. 4) to keep Travellers in secondary schooling, because Travellers were self-excluding themselves from academic qualifications that would help them in the job market. Indeed, Travellers often leave school before they take their qualifications at the end of compulsory secondary schooling (O’Hanlon, 2010; Levinson & Hooley, 2013). Consequently, the Traveller Education Support Service (TESS) aims to encourage Traveller pupils to go into, and complete, secondary education in order to achieve more highly (Ofsted, 2003; London Borough of Havering, 2011). However, these beliefs are rooted in dominant cultural trends and aspirations, in which people start full-time work after they finish compulsory schooling (*Children and Young Persons Act 1933*; UK Government, 2014), young people marry later in life (Derrington, 2010) and new fathers and mothers are, on average, 31 years old and 29 years old, respectively (Jones, 2005). These ideas conflict with Travellers’ expectations that early teens and young people, who could be as young as 14 years old (Bhopal, 2011b), work, marry and gain personal and financial independence before the compulsory school leaving age (Bhopal, 2011b; Derrington & Kendall, 2004; Levinson & Hooley, 2013; O’Hanlon, 2010). Teenage Travellers are seen to be mature adults, who are expected to work and follow the traditional patterns of their family (O’Hanlon, 2010). Travellers often view secondary schooling as actively de-skilling their children, because the secondary curriculum will not help their children to learn the family business (Danaher, Kenny & Leder, 2009) or take part in traditional Romani activities, like early marriage. Secondary and tertiary schooling are seen as irrelevant at a time when Travellers prioritise family-based learning and practical self-employment (Derrington, 2010; Toninato 2014). Thus, formal education does not give them the cultural, economic and practical skills that they need to survive in Traveller society. Traveller children self-exclude from secondary or tertiary schooling, because there is a cultural dissonance between school and the family’s expectations.

### **Discordant Behaviour**

There is a dissonance between what is acceptable behaviour in school and at home. Some teachers misunderstand aspects of Romani culture (Byrne & Smyth, 2010) and behaviour (Kiddle, 1999; Toninato, 2014). Fighting one another’s corner is valued in Romani community life (Myers & Bhopal, 2009), but this behaviour has often been criticised at school (Milbourne, 2002). Traveller parents felt this criticism stemmed from miscommunication, and were concerned that teachers were discouraging Traveller children from learning codes of respect important to Romani culture (Milbourne, 2002). Thus, schooling excludes Travellers for certain behaviours and, at the same time, loosens a Traveller’s sense of cohesion amongst the Romani group.



This situation weakens their social acceptance and sense of belonging in both groups. Consequently, a cultural dissonance between acceptable behaviour in Romani and school cultures could lead to social exclusion from one culture or the other, or both.

### **Discordant Beliefs**

Traveller children try to reconcile conflicting beliefs between school and family, where Traveller children who operate within such a dual cultural framework are often in conflict when they try to balance their loyalties (Derrington, 2007). This conflict can lead to intrinsic discord, which causes psycho-social difficulties for Traveller pupils (Levinson & Sparkes, 2006). Traveller pupils either cope by deliberately resisting the dominant culture, such as challenging teachers with verbal attacks, attending school sporadically or hiding their identity (Derrington, 2007). Traveller parents were concerned that if their children became too educated the children would be ashamed of their heritage (Levinson, 2007). Consequently, the cultural dissonance between school and family beliefs lead Traveller children to try to exclude parts of themselves from each group at the same time, which has detrimental effects on their wellbeing.

### **Racism and Bullying**

Schooling also fosters other detrimental effects for Traveller children. Racism and bullying have been constant concerns and reasons for Traveller families to not send their children to secondary school (Bhopal, 2011a; Liegeois, 1987; Marks, 2006; Ofsted, 2001). Although school practice has improved (DfES 2003, 2006), these issues still need to be continually addressed (Myers & Bhopal, 2009). Name calling is consistently recorded as a key factor in alienating Traveller children at school (Bhopal, 2004; Cudworth, 2008; Jordan, 2001; Myers & Bhopal, 2009). Travellers also suffer racist humiliation and physical abuse from others (Law, 2013). Many Traveller pupils report that teachers do not take racism seriously (Bhopal, 2009) and often fail to address and identify such prejudice (Cudworth, 2008). Teachers assume that pupils are not racist toward Travellers because they are also ‘white’ (Bhopal, 2009). Holloway (2005) also suggests that non-Travellers stereotype Travellers as being fighters, and the DfES (2005) found Traveller pupils were four times more likely to be excluded from school than any other ethnic group. There is the possibility that teachers exclude Traveller children more than non-Traveller children, because they look for behaviour that fulfils the Traveller stereotype. Certainly, many teachers have racist attitudes toward Traveller pupils (Bhopal, 2009; Derrington & Kendall, 2004; Law, 2013) and education policy fails to tackle racism towards them. Derrington (2010) noted that the single policy reference to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils was in *The Children’s Plan* (DCSF, 2007), a policy document that had strategic objectives for every child to have a “world class” education that “put [children’s and families’] needs first, regardless of traditional institutional and professional structures” (DCSF, 2007, p. 3). However, the *Plan* reflects stereotypes and assumptions of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils that are three decades out of date (Derrington, 2010). Travellers are one ethnic minority that are too often “out of sight and out of mind” (Ofsted 2003, p. 21), with regard to racism in the school



system. Thus, they are not protected from discrimination, as laid out in article 14 of the *Human Rights Act 1998*. Bullying and racism prevents Travellers from validating their membership with the school community and practices, which consequently leads to social exclusion.

### **Summary**

It seems, then, that cultural dissonance between Romani and non-Traveller cultures causes Traveller pupils to be socially excluded from one society's culture or both. British law fixates on every child fully participating in an education system until they reach the compulsory school leaving age (*Education Act 1996*), which is rooted in non-Traveller culture. This fixation overlooks the social and cultural repercussions that secondary schooling has on individual Travellers and their membership of Romani and non-Traveller communities. Indeed, Travellers view schooling with ambivalence. They need to learn to read and write to participate in the current economic climate, but schools monopolise teaching this knowledge. These institutions are culturally dissonant with Romani pedagogies, traditions, skills, expectations and behaviours. Consequently, secondary schooling reduces integration and cohesion with the family and wider Romani group, and prevents Traveller pupils learning social codes and knowledge about real-life Romani activities. In doing so, schooling is an active agent in removing Traveller pupils from traditional Romani social, cultural and economic skills. This removal leads to social exclusion. Travellers try to reconcile conflicting ideas, but this can have detrimental effects upon their well-being. In a sense, the school system fails to look at Travellers' needs and only reflects and shapes non-Traveller culture. There is a disparity between practice and policy, whereby non-Travellers matter more than Travellers, when education is supposed to be for everyone (Bhopal, 2009). This being the case, it is impossible for Travellers to be fully included at secondary school whilst simultaneously preserving their Romani identity. To fully include Travellers in secondary schooling, there needs to be a dramatic culture change in schools. Teachers would have to change their expectations that students should go on to tertiary schooling past the school leaving age. If teachers developed a more student-centred approach, they would expect pupils to do what is best for their individual needs – without judgement or too different an expectation. This may include encouraging Travellers and others, if appropriate, to take vocational-based education or other lines of work, rather than the default path to tertiary schooling. Teacher training courses would also have to include more information about Romani culture and behaviour, understanding racism in the classroom and how to address bullying, so that teachers are more able to tackle such issues that affect Travellers in the classroom. If the current discordant behaviour stems from miscommunication, teachers may also be encouraged to talk to Romani parents and students, or have a liaison officer do so on their behalf, to resolve issues appropriately, with the possibility of more-lenient behaviour rules for Travellers.

More importantly, the biggest change could come from policy makers, who would need to develop a culturally appropriate curriculum for all school pupils, not just non-Travellers. This change may include flexible school hours for Travellers, so they could balance their time between school-based and family-based learning, and encouraging Traveller family members to participate more in school life, like sharing





skills in the classroom. Policy makers could also introduce more practical, oral-based tasks or non-written examinations, to reflect different skill-sets and make the curriculum more applicable to real life. Traveller pupils should pro-actively be included in policy documents, including creating a specific document for teachers on how to tackle racism toward Traveller pupils. Traveller parents and guardians, as well as non-Travellers, would also benefit from presentations by education practitioners about how to address issues of bullying and racism at school, to empower Traveller families to tackle injustice. In doing so, school authorities can address cultural dissonance and help Traveller students to embrace their culture and have a better sense of belonging and wellbeing.

### **Conclusion**

By changing the school system to adapt to Romani culture, it is likely Traveller pupils would attend school more regularly and on a longer-term basis. Reducing the cultural dissonance between Traveller and non-Traveller culture would lead to more inclusion, respect and acceptance of others. This could lead to greater understandings of cross-cultural encounters and the meaning of humanity in our ever-globalising world.

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